

## **SDS, Future Challenges**

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The World Institute on Disability (WID), where I have worked for six years, has undertaken the task of identifying colleges and universities around the world which offer some type of Disability Studies program as part of their regular curriculum. It is clear that the Society for Disability Studies has played a significant role in this international movement.

The Society for Disability Studies has promoted looking at disability from a social rather than a medical or rehabilitation perspective. In looking for disability studies programs WID accordingly took the same perspective. We look for programs which explore the various definitions and conceptual models for the study of disability, the history of disabled people, public, legal and social policies which affect disabled people, the civil rights movement of disabled people, and the resultant legislation barring discrimination, etc. We were not looking for programs which train medical, clinical or technical staff working in the traditional medical model of disability.

Despite many advances, this perspective is still dramatically lacking in academia. Too many disability studies classes and programs are tucked into a social background component of an applied or "helping" profession and marginal to core liberal arts and sciences education. This is the biggest challenge facing the Society for Disability Studies.

Academics working in disability studies, look to women's studies, African-American studies, and gay studies as models for creating a climate of legitimacy for their work. The disability perspective needs to be interjected into existing traditional disciplines. Disability studies programs would be best served by being interdisciplinary and cross-disability and structured such that scholars have a disability studies "incubator" center for intense intellectual growth with their disability studies peers, and a path promoting the diffusion of ideas back into existing departmental structures.

A second major future challenge to SDS is to be more inclusive of and promote work about and by disabled ethnic and racial minority group members. A corollary to this is to look more broadly at disability internationally. My own discipline of anthropology certainly has not been as visible or as thoughtful as it could and should. Within disability studies almost twenty years of using some version of a minority group model, and drawing analogies to ethnic and racial strife, has not drawn us into the rainbow coalition nor has it drawn disabled people of color into SDS.

We are at a theoretical precipice both frightening and invigorating. Disability studies could be reduced to the banal. The way I cringe when I hear "almost every one is disabled before they die," gives me some insight into how it might feel to hear an unthoughtful analogy to racial oppression. Disability has nothing to do with death. What has it to do with race? Alternatively, disability studies could help build new inclusive models to understand human variation and adaptation. SDS is now an established, mature society. Its leadership must be thoughtful and clear without the loss of the youthful enthusiasm that is its hallmark.

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